

Minimize the risk of identity theft

Identity theft has become a growing problem as the personal and financial information of others has become increasingly accessible. Our mailboxes are crammed with this information – pre-approved credit offers, blank checks, bank statements, credit card statements – all loaded with such personal information such as your income; your Social Security number (SSN); your bank account numbers; and your name, address and phone numbers. Taking certain precautionary steps, however, can help minimize your risk of becoming the next victim of identity theft.

What is identity theft?

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) defines identity theft as the appropriation your personal information without your knowledge to commit fraud or theft. Here are examples of some of the most common instances of identity theft:

- Someone opens a new credit card account, using your name, date of birth, and Social Security number. When they use the credit card and don't pay the bills, the delinquent account is reported on **your** credit report.
- Someone calls your credit card issuer and changes the mailing address on your credit card account. The thief then runs up charges on your account. Because your bills are being sent to the new address, you may not immediately realize there's a problem.
- Someone establishes cellular phone service in your name. Again, since bills are most likely sent to another address, it can take time to discover this fraud.
- Someone opens a bank account in your name and write bad checks on that account. This can not only damage your credit, but can lead to inquiries from the authorities.

How does an identity thief obtain the vital information required to commit these types of crime? By taking advantage of the ever-increasing flow of personal and financial information that is used on a daily basis in our everyday transactions. Information is obtained from documents found in mailboxes, trashcans, over the Internet – in your home and in your workplace. Identity thieves exploit our busy lifestyles and the resulting carelessness with dealing with critical information, stealing pre-approved credit offers, credit card statements, and tax returns not properly disposed of when no longer needed.

Minimizing risk

While its impossible to prevent the possibility of identity theft entirely, you should take the steps needed to minimize your risk. By managing your personal information wisely, cautiously and with an awareness of the issue, you can help guard against identity theft. The FTC has these tips for consumers to minimize their risk of becoming a victim of identity theft:

Pay attention to your billing cycles. Follow up with creditors if your bills don't arrive on time. A missing credit card bill could mean an identity thief has taken over your credit card account and changed your billing address to cover his tracks.

Guard your mail from theft. Deposit outgoing mail in post office collection boxes or at your local post office. Promptly remove mail from your mailbox after it has been delivered. If you're planning to be away from home and can't pick up your mail, call the U.S. Postal Service to request a vacation hold. The Postal Service will hold your mail at your local post office until you can pick it up.

Put passwords on your credit card, bank and phone accounts. Avoid using easily available information like your mother's maiden name, your birth date, the last four digits of your SSN or your phone number, or a series of consecutive numbers.

Travel light. Minimize the identification information and the number of cards you carry to what you'll actually need on a daily basis. Don't carry your SSN card; leave it in a secure place.

Beware of "strangers". Do not give out personal information on the phone, through the mail or over the Internet unless you have initiated the contact or know who you're dealing with. Identity thieves may pose as representatives of banks, Internet service providers and even government agencies to get you to reveal your SSN, mother's maiden name, financial account numbers and other identifying information. Legitimate organizations with which you do business have the information they need and will not ask you for it. Before you reveal any personally identifying information, find out how it will be used and whether it will be shared with others. Ask if you have a choice about the use of your information: can you choose to have it kept confidential?

Keep items with personal information in a safe place. To thwart an identity thief who may pick through your trash or recycling bins to capture your personal information, tear or shred your charge receipts, copies of credit applications, insurance forms, physician statements, bank checks and statements that you are discarding, expired charge cards and credit offers you get in the mail.

Be diligent at home and work. Be cautious about where you leave personal information in your home, especially if you have roommates, employ outside help or are having service work done in your home. At work, find out who has access to your personal information (e.g., human resource personnel) and verify that the records are kept in a secure location.

Guard your SSN. Since your SSN is particularly valuable to identity thieves, give your SSN only when absolutely necessary. Ask to use other types of identifiers when possible.

Check your credit report periodically. Order a copy of your credit report from each of the three major credit reporting agencies every year. Make sure it is accurate and includes only those activities you've authorized. The law allows credit bureaus to charge you up to \$8.50 for a copy of your credit report.

If, despite your best efforts, you've been a victim of identity theft, you can call the FTC's Identity Theft Hotline toll-free at 1-877-IDTHEFT (438-4338). The FTC puts your information into a secure consumer fraud database and may, in appropriate instances, share it with other law enforcement agencies and private entities, including any companies about which you may complain. For more information on how to protect yourself from identity thieves, visit the FTC's Website at www.ftc.gov or contact the office for additional guidance regarding keeping your financial information secure